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JOHN SHELDON

AND THE

OLD INDIAN HOUSE  
HOMESTEAD

BY  
J. ARMS SHELDON

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE POCUMTUCK VALLEY  
MEMORIAL ASSOCIATION AT ITS FIELD  
MEETING, AUGUST 22, 1911



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## JOHN SHELDON AND THE OLD INDIAN HOUSE HOMESTEAD.

Every human being and every homestead is a part of the great, throbbing life of this planet, we call the earth. Whether the individual or the homestead fits harmoniously into the larger life is a matter for history to decide. It is the object of this paper to point out, clearly if possible, the relations existing between John Sheldon and the Old Indian House Homestead, and the universal life of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

The almanacs of both hemispheres gave the year as 1682. Eleven years before on the western frontier line of New England civilization, Deerfield, under the name of Pocumtuck, had come into being. A few years later it had ceased to be save in name; again it attempted to struggle into life, only to have that life quickly extinguished. Would it ever, *ever* rise from its ashes?

King Philip's clans had been driven away. Philip himself was dead. For five years silence had brooded over all this region, and it had become a lonely "dwelling for owls."

Who were the pioneers of 1682? I have chosen one who in many respects is a typical representative of the early settlers while in other ways he stands alone, a unique character.

John Sheldon was a youth of twenty-three when he came to Deerfield at the Permanent Settlement. In his veins ran the blood of Isaac Sheldon, his father, who in 1654, as a first settler, pushed up from Windsor, Connecticut, to Northampton, Massachusetts, then in the northern wilderness. Whoever the ancestors of Isaac Sheldon may have been, it is certain that Isaac, the father, and John, the

son, were born with that love of Anglo-Saxon freedom which is the choicest legacy of the English-speaking race.

When John Sheldon came to Deerfield what did he find? Dreary cellar holes and crumbling chimneys; deserted hearthstones and cheerless fireplaces where the prickly thistle, the rank burdock and the overgrown mullein were struggling with one another for possession. Here and there, perchance, were tell-tale relics—a bit of earthenware, a chunk of pewter melted in a fire, a half-charred palisade, portions of the Common Fence, broken and straggling,—these were relics of other pioneers, who in 1675 and 1677 lived, suffered or were slaughtered on this very spot.

Close by some bubbling spring a ruined wigwam or, it may be, a rude tomahawk, half buried in the earth, told of the Red Men, and brought to mind the tales of horror John had listened to when a boy in his teens. But besides these grewsome things, John Sheldon saw promising meadows stretching away in every direction to wooded hills, with a fish-laden river flowing in the midst. Where we are now gathered he may have seen graceful deer grazing beneath the slender buttonball which, to-day, in its green old age, is our grand living witness of that age of stress and storm.

The restive spirit of the pioneer grew calmer in the free air about him and the large spaces around him. Here he would make his home. Here he would bring his seventeen-years-old Hannah, already a wife of two years, and John, their baby boy.

Among the men who came at the Permanent Settlement were older and more experienced pioneers than John Sheldon. Several of the first settlers were still undaunted, still ready with brain, heart and hand to build up a new plantation. Of these were John Stebbins and Benoni Stebbins, brothers of Hannah Sheldon; Samson Frary, Godfrey Nims, Martin Smith, and Richard Weller. The next year came John Hawks, followed before 1688 by William Smead, John Weller, Joseph Barnard, Jonathan Wells, Thomas Broughton, Thomas Wells, Samuel Carter, John Catlin,

Thomas French, Daniel Belding, David Hoyt, Benjiman Hastings, Simon Beamon, and notably, John Williams, the new minister.

Somehow it makes one fairly glow to think of these hardy pioneers, all stirred by a common impulse, that of making homes and building a town. Yes, Deerfield would rise again from its ashes. It would *live*, and the deeds of these sturdy, freedom-loving folk would be the priceless inheritance of unnumbered generations.

The records of peace are traced usually upon the air while those of war are written large on the pages of history. Of the period between 1682 and 1688 we know little save what reason aided by imagination can supply.

We see these men of energy and pluck building their houses, either of logs or hewn timber, and planting their acres with corn, peas, rye, wheat, oats, pumpkins, flax and tobacco. Their vigorous wives are raising large families of children. In a sense these fathers, mothers and children were unschooled, save in "the school of the back woods," where experience, ruling with inexorable hand, was master. Yet these families, little communities in themselves, were trained by one another, just as each individual member of a family was disciplined, consciously or unconsciously, by every other member, and in the process traits of sterling worth developed with originality as the guiding star.

It was no mean task—this building of a town. On the contrary, it was a great undertaking which only freemen were fitted to accomplish. After all is said the evolution of a town is a reflection of the evolution of the individual members of that town. In both, the physical, the affectional and social, the spiritual and the intellectual needs seek satisfaction. In this young settlement the physical and social demands were being supplied. More or less comfortable homes, well stocked with the necessities of life, and gradually filling with little boys and girls were scattered along the Street.

Yonder stands the house of one of these pioneers, Samson Frary, which he built some time "after 1683" and which, it is known with certainty, was standing in 1698. It is our

sacred witness of the pioneer days of Deerfield, and thrice fortunate is this Association in its possession.

The spiritual wants of this community were considered before the intellectual needs, and even before any civil action was taken looking toward the incorporation of the town. The fact that both human nature and the law required the calling of a minister to serve as spiritual guide was proof that the church was a necessity. It may, in truth, be questioned whether the men and women of that sad, stern century from 1683 to 1783, could have survived without their faith in the personal God of the Puritan creed.

In the spring or early summer of 1686, John Williams took up his life work in the waiting field, and it continued for a period of forty-three years. Little did John Sheldon dream at this time how intimate and tender would become his relations with his pastor in the next twenty years!

December 16, 1686, was an epoch in the history of Deerfield. It was then, so far as can be ascertained, that the first town meeting was held. At last the time had come when the diverse elements, of their own free will, joined themselves into one fairly harmonious whole, and elected officers who should control the affairs of the town. "Is there anything more valuable among Anglo-Saxon institutions," says James K. Hosmer, than the "New England town meeting. What a list of important men can be cited who have declared in the strongest terms that tongue can utter the conviction of its preciousness! It has been alleged that to this more than anything else was due the supremacy of England *in* over America, the successful colonization out of which grew at last the United States." This habit of thinking and governing for one's self is the unique privilege of a free people.

John Sheldon, young, alert and ready to take a hand at the wheel, was elected at this first meeting one of the Selectmen or Townsmen, who were Assessors as well; highway surveyors, and other officers were also chosen. "The whole action," says the historian of Deerfield, "appears to have been that of an independent Commonwealth."



There were, perhaps, at this time fifty men, heads of families, settled on the Street, many of whom owned their homes. Soon after 1687, John Sheldon bought homestead No. 12 on the west side of the Street including the northern slope of Meetinghouse Hill. This homestead was first held by "Worshipful John Pynchon" of Springfield, who, however, never came here to live. John Hawks, uncle to Colonel John Hawks of Fort Massachusetts fame, was the first to occupy it. He lived here before 1675, and again in 1683 or 1684, but after 1687, John Sheldon bought the lot of Pynchon. Soon after the purchase Ensign John added one and a half acres to the south side from home lot No. 13. Somewhere on this lot he probably lived in a cabin built by himself or by John Hawks, awaiting the time when he should be able to build a house to his liking.

Fain would we linger in this growing, thriving Commonwealth, this product of the activity and foresight of the pioneers. The sky above them was clear, the air bracing, and life was promising.

Surely it would seem as if this settlement, isolated from any large center, apparently remote from wars and rumors of wars, might live on peacefully in its environment of idyllic beauty such as only the valley of the Connecticut knows how to offer. This, however, was far indeed from the truth. More than a century before a powerful nation across one thousand leagues of surging water had fixed its keen eye on this fair western land. It had sent dauntless explorers up the St. Lawrence and down the Mississippi, and wherever they had gone they had planted the lilies of France in the name of the holy Catholic church. *New France* was growing larger and stronger every year, and its lusty youth was full of promise. Before it reached maturity, however, a strange thing happened. All unwittingly another powerful nation, also three thousand miles away, had driven from their native land some of its ablest men and bravest women. This choice seed drifting across the Atlantic took root on the eastern shores of America. Wherever this happened the flag of Old England was planted in the name of the holy Protestant church. Soon *New*

England sprang into life. Thus it came about that in the last quarter of the seventeenth century two races were dominating America, the one of Latin stock, the other of Anglo-Saxon origin—the one Catholic, the other Protestant.

In one respect these two different races were alike. Both had clutched at America with hooks of steel, and with both it was victory or death. In another respect, also, they were not unlike. Neither race was far enough removed from the savage condition to discern the evil effects of employing Indians as allies. Thus it was that a war of conquest and religion, always fierce and bloody, was made more appalling by the fiendish atrocities of barbaric man.

Where should the first blow be struck? Certainly not in the more populous and well-protected centers. The field glasses of France and England alike swept the frontier line of New England and rested longest and most significantly upon the isolated settlements. Instead of being secluded in a peaceful environment these settlements were rather in the very lime light of hideous war. It is the old, old story. Through all the centuries the pioneers of thought and action have held the danger posts and the signal towers of earth.

The law of growth and development, often called the spirit of independence, was operating on this side of the Atlantic. What did England, the mother country on the other side, give her growing child? Certainly not encouragement or inspiration. On the contrary she checked growth in very many ways. In 1684, the English High Court of Chancery declared the charter of Massachusetts forfeited, and the Crown sent over men of its own choosing to serve as Governors. James II commissioned Sir Edmund Andros governor of all New England. Sir Edmund's father had been master of ceremonies to Charles I, and Edmund himself had stood high in the favor of Charles II. The sympathies of Sir Edmund were with Catholic France, so that the Puritan colonists in New England became alarmed. Day after day the east wind brought tidings to this quiet valley that roused the inhabitants to alertness. Men gathered in groups and discussed the situation. Each

had an opinion of his own and expressed it with emphasis. While the men talked the women asked one another, "What will the outcome be?"

News of the Revolution of 1688 which swept James II from the throne was received in this country in April, 1689. A few days later, as you all know, Andros, who had ruled with a tyrant's hand, was seized in Boston and put in prison. The government was then assumed by a Committee of Safety. This Committee issued a call May 2d for the towns to choose representatives to meet in Boston, May 9th. Little was done at this meeting so that a second call was sent out for another meeting, May 22d. There is no evidence on our town records that either of these calls ever reached Deerfield, but a paper found by Sheldon in the Massachusetts Archives and printed in his "History of Deerfield," proves that a meeting was held here May 17th. From this paper it is evident that John Sheldon engineered the movement which resulted in sending Thomas Wells as a representative of the town to the meeting of the revolutionary committee.

Think for a moment of the real significance of this movement. Every soldier and every man in civil office who joined the revolutionists was subject to the penalty of high treason. The situation, however, called for immediate action, regardless of consequences, and the men were ready. They were also wise and so covered their tracks that no trace of their doings could be found in the town records by the prying eyes of Andros and Randolph. Only a manuscript in the well-guarded Archives of the state revealed the truth.

Fortunately for John Sheldon and his compeers the revolution of 1688 was not a failure, and William and Mary held the throne. But now Protestant England and Catholic France were at war, and consequently the English colonies were in danger. If the French could not subdue by subtle intrigue they could employ their allies, the Indians, to harass and perhaps ultimately exterminate. Already a party of Indians had been sent out by the Governor of Canada to scalp and kill. Six persons had been murdered in North-

field. The alarm became so general that in 1690 that town was deserted. Nothing now lay between Deerfield and Canada but the forest—the haunt of the Indians and their pathway from and to Canada.

The fearful massacre at Schenectady, February 18, 1690, roused the men of Deerfield to action. They saw clearly that there is no time but the present. At a legal town meeting February 26th, it was voted, “That y<sup>r</sup> shall be a good sufficient fortification made upon the meeting hous hill.” “That y<sup>e</sup> fortification shall be don and finished by y<sup>e</sup> 8th of March next emediately ensuing.” Those who could not be accommodated in the houses already standing on the Hill, and who had not the means to build for themselves, were to have houses built for them at the town’s charge. Sergeant John Sheldon with two others should “have full power to appoint where every person’s hous or cellar shall stand w<sup>t</sup> bigness y<sup>a</sup> shall be.”

Is it possible for you and me to have any realizing sense of the conditions existing here in 1690! In spite of the fact that Deerfield was absolutely defenseless, in the very face of the hellish barbarities of the Indians urged on by the French—barbarities that make the blood shiver in our veins—in spite of these things, not a word has come down to us that any one of these fifty or sixty men thought of deserting Deerfield and seeking safety in the towns below. On the contrary, these men in town meeting assembled, voted affirmatively to build a stockade big enough to include the whole population, and to build it in ten days! Energy like this challenges admiration for this human race of ours, and gives us an abiding faith in its large possibilities.

The palisade was done, but in the process what a change had come about! The last vestige of light-heartedness had taken to itself wings, and a tense, strained condition of heart, brain, eye, ear had taken its place. A vague, dismal uncertainty was in the air, and the intuitions of both men and women foreboded ill. A garrison of sixty soldiers, sent up from Connecticut daily emphasized the wearisome truth that this was a time of war. In August of the same year an epidemic in the valley caused “a hunderd persons sick

at Deerfield," and the death of several prominent men. In 1691, one hundred and fifty Indians appeared and settled in the woods east of Wapping, and fear of their treachery haunted the people. In February, 1692, word reached Deerfield that a large army of French and Indians were moving southward from Lake Champlain. Again in the middle of May they were expected, but the cowardly assailants, finding they could not surprise, marched eastward. This year John Sheldon was appointed Ensign and also elected Selectman.

When 1693 opened Deerfield was indeed at ebb tide. Provisions were scanty owing to the impossibility of raising crops far from the fort the summer before. In its dire need the town besought the General Court for soldiers, for ammunition and for an abatement of taxes; in a word, for "such helps and reliefe as our necessities if not extreame difficulties call for."

The record at this time is an illuminating study of the New England character as influenced by the conservative tendencies of the Motherland. With death by the tomahawk on the one hand and death by starvation on the other, these people assembled and voted, March 11, 1693, "that the meetinghouse shall be new seated," and that Deacon John Sheldon should be one of three to do it. The undemocratic custom of Old England of seating the worshipers by rank was rigidly adhered to by the Puritans, in spite of their totally different environment.

The spring months were spent in watching, warding, scouting and planting. When the sun went down on the night of June 5th, all Nature tried to impart its own serenity to the troubled hearts in this little town, alone, as it were, on the northern frontier.

O why could not intuition have been strong enough and real enough to have guided the footsteps of all to the palisade on Meetinghouse Hill! Why could not some thought have been transferred across the fields of air as a warning message to these innocent souls. The people slept as though awake, doubtless dreaming of what was ever in their day thoughts when the cry "Indians!" "Indians!" pierced the

still night air. "Thomas Broughton and his wife and children are killed!" "The Wells girls are scalped!"

In the darkness of night there had been a sudden rush and a blow, eight times repeated—then silence all. The perpetrators had gone as they came like the wind, and no hand had been stretched out to aid. Two men, however, had escaped, and now there was a wild scurrying to the fort. At last all were inside the stockade, John Sheldon, his wife Hannah and their five small children among the rest.

As the dwellers on the slopes of Vesuvius return after every eruption and rebuild their homes on the sides of the fiery mountain, so the men and women of Deerfield after every attack left the safety of their fort and went back to their daily tasks at the imminent risk of a horrible fate. Do you say they had to do it or starve? Ah, but there were safe havens in the towns below.

In justice to themselves and the town of their own making they sent a cry from the heart to the heart of the Old Bay Colony for help in their distress. Slowly relief came. In the meantime news reached Deerfield that Brookfield on the east had been attacked on July 27th, and seven persons killed and others captured. October 13th, their own beloved minister, Mr. Williams, had barely escaped capture at Broughton's Pond. The next day Martin Smith on his way to Wapping was taken and carried to Canada.

In the knowledge of such dastardly deeds, and in the hourly possibility of still worse calamities nine months passed, when on September 15th, 1694, Baron de Castine with his army of French and Indians after traveling hundreds of miles, approached the town, intending to pounce upon it, and sweep it from the face of the earth. While creeping cautiously down one of the ravines east of the Street they were discovered by a lad who gave the alarm. Then the people flew. Mrs. Hannah Beamon, the school dame, and her children, among whom were probably little John, Hannah and Mary Sheldon, ran as they never ran before, and all got safely to the fort.

Preparations had been made for such an emergency; Castine was driven back, and out of this first victory of the

Deerfield men courage and confidence were born. Evidence of this is found in the vote of the town taken two weeks later, John Sheldon, moderator, to build a new meetinghouse. This vote proved that the people were here to stay, and although it took seven years to complete the structure, nevertheless the difficulties were surmounted and at last it was finished.

In 1695, one of Deerfield's leading men, Joseph Barnard, was killed by a party of Indians in ambush at Indian bridge. From the beginning of the year 1696 to its end, says Sheldon, "fear and distress pervaded the household, danger and death lurked in every by-way about the fields." In spite of this desperate situation civil duties were not neglected, and March 2d, a penalty of one shilling was laid upon every legal voter who, after being warned, did not attend town meeting.

It was late one day in September when Daniel Belding, an influential man of the town, returned home from the field with a load of corn. In that home was Elizabeth, his wife, and eight of his children, and the heart of Daniel Belding grew warm and glad at the sight of them. As silent as the moving cloud the Indians drew near. In less than fifteen minutes, his wife and three children were dead; he and two children were captives in the hands of the savages, one boy was tomahawked and left for dead, one girl shot in the arm while fleeing to the fort, and all that was left was Sarah hidden away in a chamber.

There are realities of life which it is not in the power of any language to adequately portray. I have touched upon some of these simply to show you in what school John Sheldon was trained. From 1688 to 1698, it was a school where every human faculty was sharpened, and where dauntless resolution was always pitted against inhuman slaughter.

The Peace of Ryswick was declared in Quebec, September 22, 1698. Deerfield had asserted and proved its right to be, and at last its inhabitants could lay down the gun and sword, and turn to the pursuits of civilization. Very soon the minds of the people grew heated over the question

of the education of the young. A schoolhouse must be built, a master hired and the "heads of families y<sup>t</sup> have Children whether male or female, between y<sup>e</sup> ages of six and ten years, shall pay by the poll to s<sup>d</sup> school whether y<sup>a</sup> send such children to School or not." Each year a committee was chosen to look after school matters, and one year the committee consisted of John Sheldon, William Arms and Eliezer Hawks.

At last the time had come when Ensign John Sheldon, relieved from the stress of war, was free to build a home for his family. In order to have his house within the stockade he acquired from the town this year—1698—a small tract of the training field, adjoining his homelot bought ten years before.

Let us pause here and refresh ourselves over the happy picture of John and Hannah planning their home, and watching it develop day by day. It was just such a house as you might predict a man like John Sheldon would build—strong foundations, a massive frame of heavy oak beams, bullet-proof doors and walls, broad boards forming handsome panels, a chimney built of bricks and clay mortar which would defy the tests of time—a house, plain, very plain, but enduring.

Little did John and Hannah dream while sitting together at the open door watching their frolicsome children under the leafy buttonball, that this house—this creation of their own thought—would be described and pictured in histories and in school books to remote generations. Little did they dream that the stout front door with its strong iron hinges would be held as a sacred memorial, and viewed by thousands and tens of thousands through coming centuries.

Well for them they did not dream it. Let us not think of it. Let us rather catch the inspiration of those few years from 1698 to 1702 when the people of Deerfield really *lived*. Let us go, you and I, to the housewarming when John and Hannah and their five boys and girls, with the neighbors round about were glad, yes, merry in the big, new house. There was Hannah's brother John Stebbins with Dorothy Alexander, his wife, and their five children;



her brother, Benoni and Hannah Edwards with seven children; Samson Frary with Mary Daniels and their son, Nathaniel, now a young gallant of twenty-three; Godfrey Nims and Mehitable Smead with six children; John Hawks and Alice with their one-year-old baby; also, John's son, John, with his wife, Thankful Smead, and their little one; William Smead and wife Elizabeth Lawrence; their son Samuel was drawn by some invisible magnet to Mary Price, and John to Anna Weld, while their daughter, Waitstill, was oftenest seen by the side of Ebenezer Warner. The next year the hopes of all these young hearts were realized. Jonathan Wells who, when sixteen years old, proved that boys as well as men may be heroes, was doubtless here with his wife, the widow of Joseph Barnard, with her ten children; Samuel Carter with Mercy Brooks and their four children; John Catlin and Mary Baldwin with Ruth, Joseph, Jonathan and John, and their married daughter, Mary, the wife of Thomas French, with five children; David Hoyt with Abigail Cook and four children; Martin Kellogg and Sarah Dickinson with five children; Thomas Hurst and Mary Jeffreys with five children; Benjamin Hastings with wife, Mary and three children; Henry White and Mary Alexander with six children. Here, too, was the dear and respected pastor, John Williams, with his wife, Eunice Mather and their six children. Moving among the little people and entering into their games was Mrs. Hannah Beamon, while her husband, Simon, mingled with the groups of men who were discussing the civic affairs of the town. Mrs. Beamon must have loved children, since years before she had freely opened her house to teach them the all important rudiments of knowledge.

Can you not see the radiance on the worn faces of the husbands and fathers as they watch their glad some wives and happy children all intent on having what they so well deserved—a joyful time. All join in singing and the merry dance begins. Truly we may believe that the great beams and rafters and the very foundation stones laughed and chuckled together!

The delights and triumphs of peace are infinitely greater

than the victories of war, and for three years Deerfield grew along civil, educational and industrial lines. John Sheldon and the other permanent settlers with whom we are now well acquainted, took active part in all the affairs of the town. Roads were laid out, mills built, a school maintained and a meetinghouse completed.

It was June, 1702, when the beauty of Nature was at flood tide in Deerfield that a black shadow fell over all. War was again declared between France and England. At a town meeting held June 26th, John Sheldon, moderator, it was voted that "the fort shall forthwith be Righted vp." September 11th of the same year, John Sheldon, moderator, it was voted that Sergeant Hawks shall build within the stockade. It must have been with a sense of relief that Ensign John looked upon his own dwelling within the palisade. In 1703, it was thought the fort must be rebuilt, so preparations were made for a possible future, while all worked and prayed.

One of the most graphic and charming pictures in Sheldon's "History of Deerfield" is that of "An Evening at Home." It is instinct with the home feeling, with the heart's glow and the heart's ease and the love-light of home. The scene is the kitchen of John Sheldon's house; the time might well be the night of February 28, 1704.

At last the varied activities of the long winter evening end, the buzz of the flax wheel and the hum of the big wheel cease, and the busy workers lay down to sleep.

When the sun rose the next morning John Sheldon's wife, Hannah, was dead, his youngest child was murdered and four children were captives in the hands of the French and Indians.

Of the eighteen families of the early permanent settlers with whom we have sung and danced at the housewarming only two remain unbroken. That we may realize in some measure the actual condition existing here let us ponder over the record.

John Stebbins, wife and six children all swept into Canadian captivity.

Benoni Stebbins killed.

Samson Frary killed, wife killed on march.

Godfrey Nims's wife killed on march, five children killed, three captured, Godfrey dying soon in consequence.

John Hawks's wife killed, baby killed on march; his son, John Hawks, Jr., wife and three children killed—whole family blotted out.

William Smead's wife killed and daughter Waitstill killed on march.

Samuel Carter's wife killed on march, three children killed, four captured.

John Catlin killed, four children killed, two captured; wife surviving only a few weeks.

Thomas French captured, wife killed on march, one child killed, five captured—whole family killed or captured.

David Hoyt captured and starved on march, wife captured, two children killed, three captured.

Martin Kellogg captured, one child killed, four captured.

Thomas Hurst's wife captured, one child killed and five captured.

Benjamin Hastings's child captured.

Rev. John Williams captured, wife killed on march, two children killed and five captured—out of eight children only one escaping!

Simon Beamon and wife Hannah captured.

After this wreckage of home and family, dearest to the heart of a man, what did John Sheldon do? Did his brain reel and his sense of time and space become as naught? *No. No.* Did he wander aimlessly about talking over and over again the horrors of that winter night? *No. John Sheldon was silent.* What, then, did this silent man do? He faced the awful reality and—*acted.* It is because he was a man of action, in the supreme agony of life, that yonder boulder is reared and his name is written in bronze.

When his wife Hannah, and little Mercy, and Benoni Stebbins, his brother-in-law, and Joseph Catlin, his son-in-law, and other comrades with whom he had labored for years in founding Deerfield—when all these had been laid to rest by the mourning Pocumtuck; when the stricken man stood by his desolate hearthstone, his heart with the

captives in Canada, a resolution more invincible than life itself took possession of his soul, and found expression in those simple words, "I will bring them home."

Deerfield staggered under the terrible blow: 48 dead, 111 captives in Canada; only 25 men, as many women and 75 children, 43 of whom were under ten years of age, were left—more than half of the population taken by one deadly swoop! But in the midst of this destruction the house of Ensign John Sheldon stood unscathed. Its massive door still hung on its stout iron hinges, but now it bore a scar which time could not heal. The house was baptized in blood, and henceforth for 144 years it would tell its tragic tale to the passer-by, while in all New England history it would be known as "The Old Indian House."

The Massachusetts Government had long recognized the ability of Ensign John Sheldon, and now appointed him Envoy to Canada for the redemption of the Captives.

When the frosts of December had frozen the rivers the man was ready, and by his side stood young John Wells. Says the brilliant historical writer, C. Alice Baker:

"We need not go back to King Arthur for exploits of chivalry; our colonial history is full of them. This man long past the daring impulses of youth,—this youth whose life was all before him—show me two braver knights-errant setting out with loftier purpose on a more perilous pilgrimage."

Down the Albany Road walked John Sheldon with firm step controlled by an indomitable will,—across the river, through "Little Hope" to the larger realm of hope and faith beyond; over Hoosac Mountain, along the Mohawk Trail to Albany, thence northerly through trackless forests down Lake George and Lake Champlain, down the Sorel to the St. Lawrence.

Of the daily life of this man while on this hazardous journey we know scarcely nothing. No diary was kept, only accounts of expenses to be rendered the home government. We do not know what sufferings he bore; what wild beasts or wild men he encountered; how far he traveled by day or by night; what he ate to sustain strength; what

accidents befell—not one of the thousand experiences that make up the history of a day. We know nothing of these things, but we do know something infinitely better than all these things—we know that the man went *on*, ON, ON: that no obstacle was big enough to stop him; that no mountains, arctic blasts or treacherous Indians could defeat his ultimate purpose. We know he reached his goal—Quebec. This plain farmer born and bred to the soil, with the homely traits and the common sense born of the soil, with his intellect sharpened by years of training, stood unabashed in the presence of the French Governor of Canada, the representative of “His Most Christian Majesty,” Louis le Grand. We know that John Sheldon labored as only a man with a single aim can labor.

Here in this gay, foreign city he met the pastor of his youth and mature manhood, John Williams, and through a mutual sorrow their mutual friendship was sealed forever.

But alas! the ransom of Mr. Williams could not be obtained. He was a prize to be held for a prize, and the heart of John Sheldon was sad within him, but in determination and effort he never faltered.

While in Quebec, Ensign John wrote his son’s wife, Hannah, in captivity, a letter, dated April 1, 1705; it begins “*der child.*” Could there be anything briefer or sweeter! This letter reveals tenderness as well as strength, and the clear, firm handwriting is that of a man who had neither time nor heart for rounded periods or flourishes.

At last five captives were released and in May, John Sheldon returned to Deerfield, disappointed but not defeated. “In the lexicon of this bright youth,” as in that of one of his descendants, “there is no such word as fail!” We see him at the close of a summer’s day, when the shadows lengthen and thoughts of home burn and glow, walking slowly along the crest of the hill through his own home lot. He sees nothing around him for his eye is fixed on a point in the northern horizon, and his heart, outspeeding his vision, is in far off Canada. Suddenly his grave features relax, and a light divine illumines his face. The leaves and vines above him in sympathy draw closer and catch the

audible words as they break from his lips, "I will go again!" The spot where a noble resolution is born which must in its very nature crystallize into action is holy ground! Such, in truth, is the soil of the Old Indian House Homestead!

In Boston, Governor Dudley and his Council with the advice of Lord Cornbury, Governor of New York, was negotiating with the Governor of Canada for the exchange of prisoners. The proposals of the Canadian Governor could not be accepted, and Governor Dudley wrote an answer which His Excellency and Council ordered "to be dispatched to Quebec by Mr. John Sheldon, attended with a servant or two, and two French prisoners of war."

Accordingly on January 25, 1706, in the very depth of winter, John Sheldon as Ambassador from our government to the royal government of Canada set out on his tedious journey. With him besides the prisoners were Joseph Bradley of Haverhill, and his faithful young companion, John Wells. A truce had been arranged for five weeks, so the party pushed on more speedily, arriving in Quebec "the beginning of March." Here conditions were trying in the extreme, but John Sheldon had made up his mind that French diplomacy and Indian reluctance to give up captives must be overcome so far as it lay in human power. The large number of French prisoners which Dudley had gathered at Port Royal waiting to be exchanged was a forceful argument in his plea. After three months' ceaseless effort attended, as he tells us, with "extraordinary Difficulties, Hazards and Hardships," John Sheldon set sail for Boston on May 30th with forty-four English captives. They reached their destination August 2d, and a week later the journey to Deerfield began. It seems as if we could hear the forests all along the Old Bay Path resounding with their songs of praise. But there was one, revered and loved, who was not among them. John Williams, still bound, had sent his flock a "Pastoral Letter" in which were those vital words, "*Thanksgiving* is the best Thanksgiving."

Now began active operations in collecting French prisoners in exchange for English captives. These prisoners

had been placed in the different towns and Deerfield had two. August 27, 1706, John Sheldon, constable, received orders from Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Partridge, commander in the Valley, "to impress two Squa Lynes and any other Necessary the two Frenchmen now going to Canada stand in need of."

The French prisoners, with the prize Captain Baptiste, sailed for Quebec in the Hope, and arrived in Canada about October 1st. When the vessel returned the result of these negotiations was apparent; in the Hope came John Williams with 57 other captives to Boston. Then a great wave of rejoicing swept from the Bay to the Valley. John Sheldon was chosen as agent for the town of Deerfield to go to Boston, and invite Mr. Williams to return to his old field of labor.

But there were still ninety captives in Canada who must be redeemed. Governor Dudley proposed to his Council January 14, 1707, to have "a Person Ledger at Quebec, to put forward that affair, and that Mr. John Sheldon who has been twice already may be employed with a suitable retinue to undertake a journey thither on that service." In accordance with these instructions, in the middle of April, John Sheldon for a third time set out on his, "perilous pilgrimage." Although the party bore a flag of truce it was a time when French and Indians were thirsty for blood. In full realization of the treachery of human nature in time of war, John Sheldon pressed steadily on. One incident only of this journey is known to us. It is recorded in Ensign John's own hand as an item in the charge for expenses: "To an Indian to guide us into the way when bewildered 6 livres." The party was lost; they knew neither north nor south, east nor west. In their bewilderment an Indian guided them "into the way." This kindly deed is like the flash of a search light in the darkness.

Quebec was reached May 9th, but now John Sheldon found he was in the enemy's country in very truth, and that enemy in active preparation to meet an expected attack by the English. He was watched constantly to prevent home communication, and though actually Leger, that

is, Resident Minister at Quebec, he was virtually little better than a prisoner. Under these discouraging circumstances he was able at last to secure the release of only seven captives, and when he left, the embassy was accompanied by five French soldiers, under the command of Captain de Chambly, brother of Hertel de Rouville, the man who had destroyed Deerfield.

John Sheldon had brought or been instrumental in bringing 113 captives from Canada to New England. His career is epitomized in the inscription upon the tablet we dedicate to-day, and this inscription summarizes my paper:

John Sheldon 1658-1733

Hannah Stebbins 1664-1704

Married Nov. 5, 1679

The home of John Sheldon was on this lot.

Here, Feb. 29, 1704, his wife and one child were killed  
and four children were taken captive  
by the French and Indians.

John Sheldon was a permanent settler 1682

Member of the first Board of Selectmen,

Deacon of the First Church,

Ensign of the first military company.

A Leader in civil affairs.

Guide in a political crisis.

Envoy for the redemption of captives in Canada Dec., 1704

Ambassador for the exchange of prisoners Jan., 1706

Leger at Quebec 1707

The three journeys were overland through the wilderness.

Once again in 1714

Captain Sheldon then of Connecticut was secured  
by our Government on a fourth mission.

This Homestead is presented to the

Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association

to be forever kept in memory of

the eminent services of John Sheldon

and the scene

where his great life tragedy was enacted.

To mark this historic ground

the Association places this tablet

A. D. 1910.

John Sheldon, in common with all of us, could not choose the age or the place in which to be born; these are matters beyond our control. But given the century and the envi-



ronment, he set himself wholly—body, mind, heart, spirit—to do the work which that century demanded of him. His was an age of turbulence and sorrow when human lives were spent in the shadow, but in spite of these conditions John Sheldon strove persistently for the building of a town, and, thereby, for the building of New England and the building of a nation.

No more fitting memorial to Ensign John Sheldon could there be than his own homestead, where he lived, loved and suffered, and where his descendants lived for nearly a century.

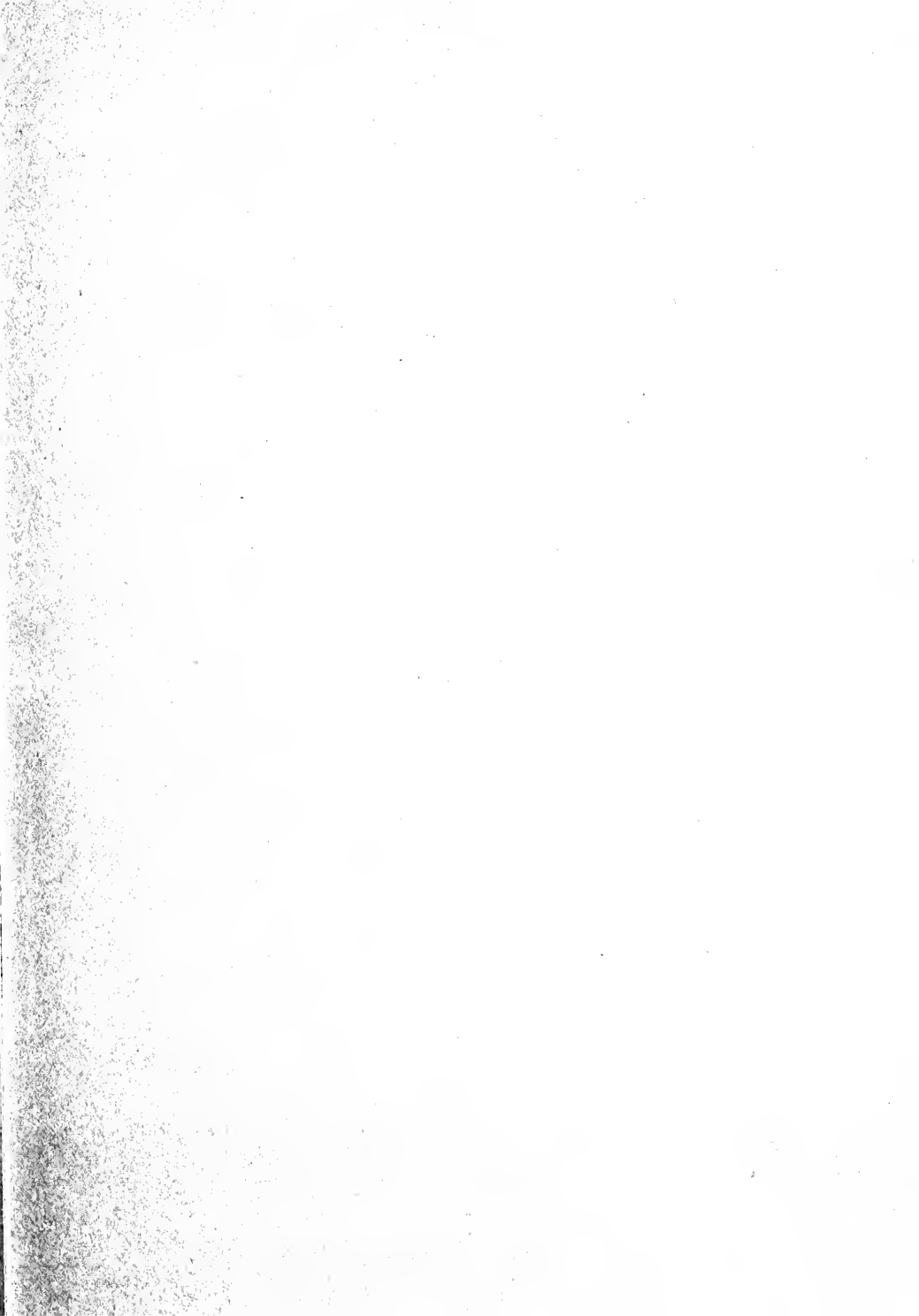
Certainly no more tender tribute to his life of service could be paid by his very great-grandson than the gift of this homestead to the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association which will hold it forever sacred.

The life of John Sheldon is a bugle call to *action, action* for the age in which we live. *Let us, every one of us, heed the call.*









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